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The Leader Who Serves (Windsor, UK)

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THE LEADER WHO SERVES

WINDSOR WEEKEND

APRIL 23, 1994

C. WILLIAM POLLARD, CHAIRMAN
THE SERVICEMASTER COMPANY
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS

Will the leader please stand up? Not the president or the person with the most distinguished title, but the role model. Not the highest-paid person in the group, but the risk taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener.

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice, dislocation and discontinuity. The changes in the politics and economies of what was the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and what is emerging in China have affected the lives of millions of people.

Yes, there is more freedom in the world today and certainly more choice and definitely more confusion. The restraints that suppressed age-old conflicts of some people groups are no longer there. Both religious and cultural hatreds have come to the surface.

The infrastructures we have developed in the West to help guide the freedom of choice cannot be easily duplicated in societies that have grown up under central planning and control, nor can these societies assimilate or allow the inevitable excesses of freedom, whether they be the sexual liberties, drugs, violence, failures, or poverty, that we've allowed in the West. The only thing certain about tomorrow is that it will be different from today. Peter Drucker, the noted management guru, has referred to it as a time of the post capitalist society. He concludes that information technology, not capital, will be the critical resource of the future.

Charles Handy refers to it as the Age of Unreason and says we need more upside down thinking. The upside down thinker wonders why roads are free and railroads are expensive, or why there is a need for a national curriculum when people learn as individuals. The upside down thinker tries to plan for a world in the future where less than half the work force will be in full-time jobs. The rich and talented will have to work harder and have less time for leisure, and the poor will have more time for leisure and less money for satisfaction. The wars and battles of the future will be among the people groups, not nation states.

In the United States, a sociologist from the University of Virginia has concluded that our society is heading for cultural wars. He identifies the changes as involving differences regarding the most fundamental ideas and beliefs about who we are and how we are to order our lives, individually and together. For many, there is no moral reference point, so in our country we have the conflict

between pro choice, pro life, gays and straights, the secular and the religious.

There are those in our universities and centers of learning who discuss our period of time in terms of post modern and deconstruction thinking. Everything is relative. There are no standards or meaning. They advocate that the university is no longer a place for pursuit of knowledge. In post modern thought it becomes a place to pursue pleasure and desire. It should be more erotic than cerebral. Words no longer have a common meaning. Interpretation is in the eye of the reader or listener, but however you view or label this rapidity of change and choice and the lack of predictability in the events that swirl around us, I believe that in this crucible of uncertainty there is great opportunity for positive direction, provided those of us who have been trained to think lead.

Samuel Beckett and James Joyce were friends and confidants. Although the writings of Joyce received more fame and publicity, Beckett won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. His short stories, novels, plays, and radio and television scripts are generally obscure and esoteric works stressing the absurdity and despair of life. His characters are typically engaged in meaningless tasks to occupy their time but have no purpose or mission and accomplish nothing. As he spoke with unflinching honesty about the emptiness of life without direction and purpose, he may well have been describing the modern day person in an environment of accelerated change and choice without leadership.

This is not how things have to be. A leader who is willing to serve can provide hope and not despair and can be an example for those who want direction and purpose in their life and who desire to accomplish and contribute.

Now as I come to these conclusions about the world around us and the role of leadership, I do so not as a politician, educator or philosopher, but simply as a businessman, a businessman who is seeking to lead a fast-growing and dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster--masters of service serving the Master. Our revenues today are in excess of four billion. We provide management services to over 1300 healthcare institutions, 500 colleges and public schools, and 100 major industrial facilities. We are also providing a variety of specialty services to over 4.5 million homeowners.

We are a company that has experienced rapid growth, doubling in size every three years for the past twenty years. We are a public company and our shares are listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Every business day my performance can be measured by whether the price of our stock goes up or down. Yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments, where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter and where earnings and profits have always been up every quarter for the past twenty years. The people to whom I am responsible as a leader vote every day. They buy, hold, or sell their share of ownership.

The majority of our business is done in the United States, although we now compete in the global economy with operations located in 22 foreign countries stretching from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. Our future and survival are simply dependent upon over 200,000 people, most of them located in our customer's environment and with many different skills and talents, doing what is right in providing a quality service.

There is much about our business that may be classified as routine or mundane. We are often dealing with people in entry level positions--unskilled, and many times uneducated and, more often than not, unnoticed. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air handling units, kill bugs, provide maid service, and maintain and repair home appliances. The task before us is to train, motivate and develop people so that they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work and, yes, even be better people. This is both a management and a leadership challenge. For us in ServiceMaster it is more than a job or means to earn a living. It is, in fact, a mission--a way of life. Our Company objectives are simply stated: To Honor God In All We Do, To Help People Develop, To Pursue Excellence, and To Grow Profitably. These first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operations of our business, they provide for us a reference point for what we do and how we determine that which is right and seek to avoid that which is wrong. They, in effect, define our mission.

First, we seek to recognize the dignity and worth of every person because they have been created in God's image. Thus our role as leaders involves more than just what the person does on the job. We also must be involved in what that person is becoming as a whole person and how the work environment is contributing to the process.

Is he or she growing as an individual who can contribute at work, at home and in the community? And do I, as a leader, have a positive influence on the growth of this individual? Stressing this value, as you might anticipate, affects one's view of the importance of training and involves more than teaching a person to use the right tools or to complete an assigned task within a defined period. It also includes how that person feels about their work and about themselves and how that person relates to others in the work environment or at home.

This means that if I am to be involved in the leadership process, then as part of my training I should also experience what it is like to do the hands-on work and to feel the emotions of those I am going to manage. It is for this reason that every manager in ServiceMaster spends time in training actually doing the tasks he will ultimately manage others to do.

So when I started with ServiceMaster over 17 years ago as senior vice president responsible for the legal and financial affairs of the company, the first three months of my training was involved in doing actual cleaning and maintenance tasks in hospitals, industrial facilities, and homes. It was for me a learning and serving experience and helped me to identify with the needs and concerns of our service workers. It was a great lesson in servant leadership. It has been a constant reminder that I must always be prepared to serve and should never ask anyone to do something that I am not willing to do myself.

(Share a few thoughts about character.)

The servant leader must be committed. He is not a bystander or simply a holder of a position. His leadership responsibility is for the long term and not for his own short-term benefit.

No enterprise can function to its capacity unless its people can rely upon the covenants and commitments of their leaders. This is more than just something formalized into a written agreement. It goes far beyond the covenants usually contained in any legal document. It extends to the people who are relying upon the leader for their future. It is fulfilling our campaign promises.

It is our "word" and the promises we make to each other that provides the framework for relationships to grow. A leader must keep his promises to the people he leads, even if it is at his own personal risk and sacrifice. It is his obligation.

One of the best ways I have found to communicate the extent of this obligation is to picture it as a debt--a liability, if you will--on the balance sheet of every leader.

Several years ago I was visiting with one of our officers about a new leadership position he had received and the opportunity for him to acquire some ownership in ServiceMaster. It would mean that he would have to borrow a significant amount of money to purchase the stock. He was delighted about the promotion, but he was concerned and questioned the ??? of the risk of the indebtedness for the purchase of the stock. I asked him to make up a simple T account balance sheet and reviewed with him his assets and liabilities.

The only indebtedness listed was the mortgage on his house. I then asked him about the indebtedness he assumed when he took on the responsibility of leading this important unit of ServiceMaster, which involved over 1,000 people. How did he list that on his personal balance sheet? How were the opportunities, jobs, and families of these 1,000 people going to be affected by his leadership? Would there be more or fewer opportunities a year from now, two years from now, and would his leadership make the difference? How did he quantify this obligation? It was a responsibility and obligation of leadership as real as any indebtedness he had ever incurred. In fact, it was larger than what he would have had to borrow to purchase the ServiceMaster shares. And so it is with a servant leader--a responsibility and obligation to the people being served, but also real joy as one sees the results of serving and developing others.

The servant leader listens and learns from those he leads. He works at making himself available. His door is always open. He is out and about talking and listening to people at all levels of the organization. He must be willing to walk a mile in the other person's shoes.

As he listens, he learns. He becomes a frantic learner and avoids the trap that so many so-called successful leaders experience that I refer to as the arrogance of ignorance--sitting in large offices with big staffs and thinking they know and understand the people they lead because they have achieved some successes in their life and can read the reports that others provide for them.

As part of my continuing listening process among our employees, I often will have coffee with various departments or service units. Recently, at the conclusion of one of these coffees, an employee who had been with us for over 25 years asked several simple but very direct questions. "Bill, just tell me one thing. Is my job secure? Will the value of my stock in ServiceMaster go up or down? Can I trust the person who will be appointed as your successor?"

Ron had three questions, but really only one concern--security for himself and his family. As a leader, it was good for me to be reminded of this basic need. As a leader, it gave me a wonderful opportunity to share something of our vision for the future, and it reminded Ron that the future also depends on his performance and the performance of many others who are part of the ServiceMaster team. It provided me an opportunity to communicate the importance of teamwork. You see, Ron was a shipping clerk--an important part of the link in getting products and equipment on time as part of serving our customers. By asking the questions, by being there to listen and learn, both Ron and I had a new appreciation of each other and our dialog was heard by over 200 others in our shipping department. So the experience and effect was not limited to the two of us.

As leaders, our job is to make things happen. We are responsible to initiate and, in some cases, create disequilibrium in order to maintain the vitality of the organization we lead. Too many organizations, including governments, are crippled by the cancer of bureaucracy, with people caught up in the activities and layers of management, but not results--defending the status quo, preserving a position, maintaining employment, but not making a decision to serve and create value.

This debilitating indifference curve that organizations, by their very nature, foster and encourage must be redefined so that people are enabled and empowered to succeed in serving and to innovate and improve as they become owners of the result. The leader should provide elbow room for mistakes but also insist on accountability for achieving the specific objectives. This type of leader learns to practice the rules of good hygiene for the organization by initiating organized abandonment of those activities that are no longer relevant for the future. When something is no longer productive or relevant, it should be stopped. A dead corpse doesn't smell any better the longer you keep it around.

As the leader makes things happen through others, he must be generous in his delegation of authority and responsibility. It is a grave wrong and injustice for a superior to steal from a subordinate the ability to make a decision.

In making things happen through others, the servant leader must always be willing to risk his own involvement for the desired result. Brian Oxley, one of the officers in our business, is a great example of a leader who makes things happen. His unit usually meets or exceeds budget--not because they have been soft budgets or because he is an expert at forecasting--when things don't happen as planned, he knows how to move sideways like a crab and interject alternatives, with the end result and objective always clearly in mind.

I will never forget the time I was with Brian on a Saturday evening in London. I had the idea that we should complete the day by seeing a play at the Savoy. It was *A Man For All Seasons* starring Charlton Heston. As we were leaving the hotel, it became apparent it was going to be difficult to get a cab. I suggested to Brian that he go across the street. I gave the bellman a tip to try to get a cab in front of the hotel while I walked up the block trying to flag down a cab from the other direction. After about 10 minutes, and now close to curtain time, it seemed like it was going to be an impossible task to get to the theater in time. Then Brian waved indicating he had a ride. It was not a cab. Brian concluded long before I did that securing a cab might be the orthodox way

to go, but it wasn't going to get us to the theater on time. He was simply hailing down private citizens, asking if they would take the two of us to the theater. On the third try he found a willing party. He got the job done and was willing to take a risk on doing something different to accomplish the task. It is this single-minded focus and commitment to achieve the objective that is necessary of the leader if the people are to be served. Otherwise, their future will be at risk.

A servant leader is a giver, not a taker. He never holds on to a position or title. He has the job because he can live without it.

This requires of all good leaders a plan for succession and development of future leaders. The servant leader should be of the mind that he or she will serve until a successor is identified and ready and not one moment longer. It is the availability and readiness of the right person for the future that should determine whether a leader steps aside and not any predetermined date, age, or other artificial criteria. The leader's commitment to serve goes beyond rank, title or position. It is not dependent upon any perceived importance or lack thereof, or any specific task assigned. Commitments like this do not allow for surprises and, by their nature, generate reciprocal commitments that will create a mutual dependence, not unilateral action. It provides for an overlap of leadership like shingles on a roof.

The servant leader believes in the people he leads and is always ready to be surprised by their potential. Several years ago when I was involved in the process of handing out awards for years of service at one of our award recognition events, a young man came forward who had served our company for ten years with distinction. As I presented the service pin to him, he didn't put it in his lapel like everyone else had done. He simply took the earring out of his ear and put it in his ear. It reminded me that people are different, and I should never be too quick to judge potential.

The servant leader learns to accept these differences and seeks to provide an environment where different people contribute as part of the whole. The servant leader promotes diversity, recognizing that differences of people can strengthen the group.

There are times, however, when a leader must be prepared to exclude those who, by their choice, seek to destroy or demean others.

Differences can be both born and acquired, and we must be cautious of any broad and simplistic classifications. We should avoid reaching generic conclusions about the way any so-called class, protected or otherwise, thinks, acts, responds, initiates, creates, or functions. Max DePree in his book, *Leadership is an Art*, identifies diversity as an element of human worth. He concludes that leaders are dealing with God's mix. People are made in God's image, a compelling mystery, but unavoidably diverse.

As a group of different people work together under effective leaders, we are confronted with the reality that no one person can accomplish the task by himself. Each individual standing alone contributes less than as a member of the whole. "Two can accomplish more than twice as much as one and the results can be much better." If one falls, the other pulls him up. But if a

man falls when he is alone, he is in trouble. One standing alone can be attacked and defeated. But two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three is even better, for "a triple-braided cord is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

As servant leaders, we can provide the environment for people to learn and grow as they work and share together. It can provide a wonderful illustration of God's love and the potential of His created beings.

During 1989 I had the opportunity to travel in what was then the Soviet Union and lecture in Moscow at the Academy of the National Economy. During my time I also had the opportunity to visit St. Petersburg, the city that was then called Leningrad. While I was there, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in the large hotel which, at that time, was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in her and her task. I engaged her in conversation with the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to work with. Olga had been given a T frame for a mop, a dirty rag and a dirty bucket of water to do her job. She really wasn't cleaning the floor. She was just moving dirt from one section to another. The reality of Olga's task was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over.

Olga was not proud of what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the result. I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I'm sure you could have eaten off the floor in her two-room apartment. But work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done. There was no servant leader for Olga.

I contrast this time with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London, England. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers as the chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me and gave me a big hug. She thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patient rooms, providing a detailed "before and after" ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two women? They were both about the same age. Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, India. But their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited resources. One was very proud of what she was doing. It affected the kind of person she was becoming. The other was not and had a limited view of her potential and worth. The difference, I suggest, had something to do with servant leadership or the lack thereof.

Servant leaders must be value driven and performance oriented. They must think through what is right and what is wrong in executing their responsibilities. They must be involved in leading people to do things right and to do the right thing. How does one make the right choice?

Where are the standards, the absolutes, the immutables?

Several months ago, I had the responsibility of serving on the selection committee for a new president and chief executive officer of a large insurance company in the United States where I serve on the board of directors. We interviewed some of the top leaders in the insurance industry in our country for this position. I asked each candidate one very simple question: how do you determine whether something is right or wrong? The initial response from many was limited to how they determined whether the business was in trouble or not. After I explained that the question went beyond the business issues and involved the question of whether an action was morally right or wrong, the answers were even more confusing. Some concluded you determined right and wrong by the way you were raised or the views of your parents. Others concluded the reference point was the law. Only a few were ready to identify their ultimate reference point beginning with their belief in God. This experience reflects where many leaders are. They have not thought much beyond what they are going to do or how to do it. The whys of life have not captured their thinking. For me, the purpose and reason for life begins with my faith and trust in the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ. He is the author of my life and provides the standards by which I seek to serve and lead.

But for my beliefs and these standards to become a reality in the lives of the people I work with, I must not only state the beliefs, but I must also provide an example by my actions and conduct and maintain a continuing expectation and standard for the people of the organization to follow. Truth cannot be compromised. The truth of what we say is told by what we do. As the founder of ServiceMaster used to say, "If you don't live it, you don't believe it."

But in a pluralistic environment with a great diversity of views, can there be a right or wrong? Where is the reference point for leadership? As I have already mentioned, our reference point in ServiceMaster begins with our first objective: To Honor God In All We Do. We seek to discover and apply those God given standards, God given limitations, and God given freedoms.

This starting point becomes the basis of a social contract among the members of our company and distinguishes it from a business where the social contract may be limited to earning a profit. If earning a profit is the only basis for the social contract, then profit does become an end goal, not a means goal. We are seeking to build something different and unique that begins with God and the people He created. The point of exclusion is not whether a person is a Christian. It is, instead, whether a person accepts truth and respect of the dignity and value of others as a basis for our joint effort. Projects are not forsaken or placed in a lesser category--they are essential to the survival of every economic entity--they are a measure of the effectiveness of what we are doing, but they are a means goal--not the end goal--creative tension yes--???? ????.

Leaders recognize that we are all prisoners of our hope. It is our hope that sustains us. It is our vision of what could be that inspires us and those we lead. In implementing the vision, the leader accepts the reality that he doesn't have all the answers. He shouldn't doubt in the dark what he has seen in the light. The results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace, and the story will be told in the changed lives of others. There is no scarcity of feet to wash. The towels and the water are available. The limitation, if there is one, is our ability to be on our hands

and knees and be prepared to do what we ask others to do.

And so as leaders, the penetrating question from our Lord is: do you understand what I have done for you? What are we doing here!

* * *

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